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DANCING AND THE DRAMA EAST
AND WEST BY STELLA BLOCH WITH
AN INTRODUCTION BY ANANDA
COOMARASWAMY

ORIENTALIA, NEW YORK, 1922

INTRODUCTION



OWHERE is the genius of the East more clearly manifested than in the theatre. Miss Bloch, who is herself a trained dancer, speaks with authority on what she has seen in the East, and it is remarkable that almost every one of her observations could be justified by reference to chapter and verse of the technical literature.

The comparison of Eastern art with science is likewise well-considered: for like the scientist, the Oriental craftsman aims at explicit demonstration rather than elegant procedure, and the intrusion of personal taste is to be avoided in art as the intrusion of personal bias is avoided in science. In setting forth the stories of heroes, or making the images of gods the Asiatic craftsman has no thought of *art*, as we now understand the word. The primary qualification demanded of him was obedience: he was not required to be a creature of moods, but to know his trade. Not that the factor of devotion to the theme is excluded: on the contrary, without such devotion, nothing can be

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P. E. WOLLEN

done: but that the theme is infinitely greater than the man.

Oriental art, moreover, is not an escape from life, nor an interpretation of life having any peculiar tendency: it is a part of life itself in the same sense as the art of preparing a meal or designing a motor car. It is thus entirely without affectation and securely founded in real experience.

The art of modern Europe has no such inner necessity. At the best, its various expressions, as Professor Lethaby has remarked, are but one man deep. Behind the Asiatic craftsman stands the race, precisely as behind the Catholic priest there stands the Church. Hence the power, a like of the Oriental culture and the Catholic tradition. Under these conditions art has existed from time immemorial as an essence recognizable in every practical human activity—all the arts, in fact, are useful, and none is practised as an end in itself.

"Fine Art," on the contrary, is a refinement upon life, and by no means inherent in life itself—if it were otherwise it would be apparent in our streets,

our costume, kitchen utensils, churches, and department stores. We have learnt to speak of "art for art's sake," and to leave it out of our daily life, precisely as we make of religion a Sunday observance, and leave it out of our banking and making love.

Miss Bloch's discussion of the Asiatic theatre, uncompromising as it may appear to those who are attached to their illusions of the Mysterious East, shows that she has grasped the underlying principles of Asiatic cultures and understands their well-proportioned architecture: these civilizations, with their arts, are as well and directly fitted to the needs of humanity as the form of a flower to the needs of reproduction. Nominally an essay on the theatre, this is something more than a discussion of Oriental dancing: it is an introduction to the theory of Asiatic civilisation.

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY.

*Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston, December, 1921.*

THE IDEAL DRAMA



It is only at the height of a culture that the architecture of true drama uplifts itself; at the moment when temples are built and the epic arises; when life is seen in legends and these legends become symbols and the symbols are carved on stones, and the stones built into a palace for the king or the gods. It is then that the walls of a temple are the manuscript of life itself. The epic rushes through the lips of every bard and none intrudes a personal grace upon the divine parable.

Sacrifices and rites are performed according to formalities laid down by the gods themselves. It is in this devout spirit that the carver learns the craft of image-making, the singer prays, and the philosopher expounds the great principle. It is in this spirit that the actor advances upon the stage, his whole constitution inspired by faith in the action which he shall take part in unfolding.

For the dramatist, as for all other craftsmen, the theme is already fixed and only calls for orches-

tration: the manner of its presentation is a tradition, and his function lies in directing the players according to that lore which accompanies the performance of the epic. His work is that of one, who in obedience to an architect, supervises the building of a house and indicates to the workmen every detail of procedure. Whence arises the superstition that a plot merely set down in words to be spoken is drama? The drama has no reserves and makes use of every human device of expression. All the arts are in its service. The dramatist must be learned in the use and combination of these, according to the severe laws set down by the gods.

It is for the multifarious expressions of The Great Tale that the theatre exists: for the human presentation of the adventures of gods and great men. No imitation of everyday life shall be represented here—only the doings of divinities. Therefore the drama is never spoken in prose, nor is it realistic in gesture: it is always danced and sung that the manners of gods and heroes may be distinguished.

The actor's training is one which fits him to obey.

He has no need for gifts—passion, insight or judgment. From childhood he is trained in traditional gestures, song, and other means of expression in infinite combination, that he may be prepared for the directions of the dramatist. How far from his mind to add to, or enhance a movement! For him every minutest step has been fixed by a law superior to humanity itself, how much farther from individual contrivance!

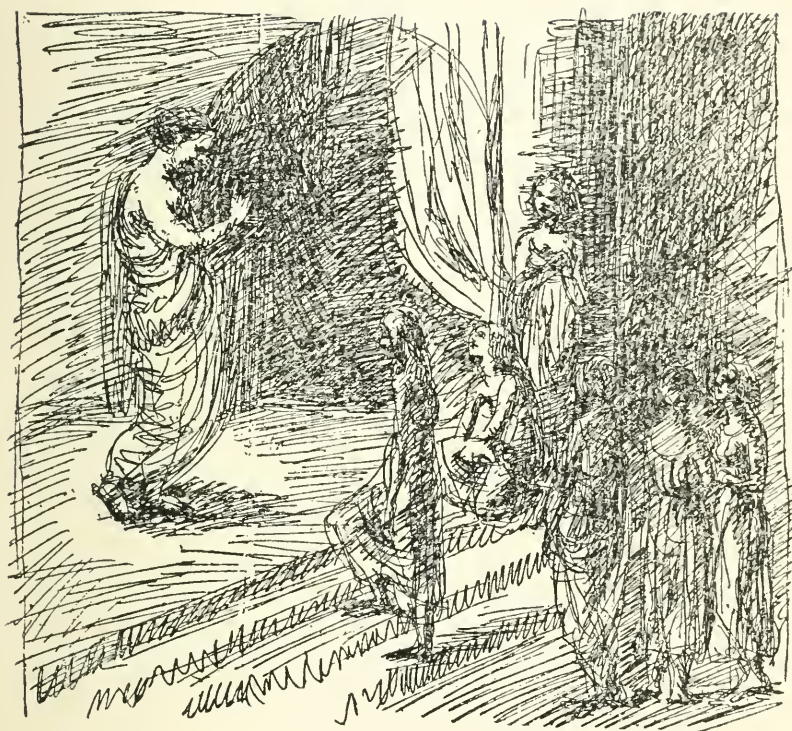
To the community the drama is familiar as are the words of their prayers, and the manner of its presentation never varies. An audience to such a performance does not gather for purposes of enjoyment or stimulation, but out of a need to look upon life without prejudice or passion. The drama is a rite, not a diversion, a concentration upon life, and not a distraction from it. ✓

II

In the light of such a definition of the theatre, Europe cannot claim to a suspicion of the true drama. Hers is a destiny that heaves and surges on the unsteady tide of individual contrivance.

Europe is the domain of Art and the whole activity surrounding the drama is something utterly outside of Art: for Art is in its essence and culmination an interpretation of life and subject to the prejudice of the individual artist—but the Drama is life itself speaking through the crafts and by means of a whole inspired race. The individual interprets life and produces Art—a race accepts life and creates new forms of Life.

Perhaps the most serious effort put forth on the modern European stage is that of Isadora Duncan in the training of her six pupils. But this school has achieved something far different from the intent that began it. Here are six girls chosen in childhood for beauty and talent, trained in the art of movement and expression according to the precedent of their master. They were brought together and disciplined for the purpose of fulfilling a chorus to Isadora's leadership. They were to respond to her gesture unanimously as the grasses of the meadow sway to the wind. It would have been an architecture like that of the Greek drama. But such things are not achieved by deliberation, how-



ISADORA DUNCAN

ever profound—nor are they the fruit of individual endeavor, and Isadora's six girls, instead of moving as one according to classic principle, are marvelously versed in the art of self-expression and each is self-conscious of her own special grace. There is no finer flower of the glorious adolescence of European culture; but how like a mirage is this romanticism beside the power where immortal gods order the Arts!

Lesser than romantic are the efforts of the Art Theatres. Here cynicism and idealism find every refinement of expression. To caricature and to idealize are both disparaging interpretations of reality, and produce the powerful evil—realism. They, in the service of this master, seek to reproduce the surface of life—thinking effect to be the highest achievement of man and powerful as life itself. To them one theme is as worthy as another for significant presentation, in that life is everywhere. But who can speak divine prayers to a god to whom he is not pledged by the strongest devotion? To the world the theme may mean nothing, but to the artist it must be all things before

his lips can utter a moving verse. The art theatres of Europe are rich in talent and serious effort, but they revolve about a dark sun. What play is to a group of players what the Christian legend was to the Italian painters? It is no spiritual impulse that dictates the scrupulous realistic performances of an art theatre—it is rather the desire of the materialist for greater refinements. All the virtue in such performances, from the playwright's composition to the actor's speech, is dependent on the virtue within each separate personality concerned, and such virtue is as uncertain, as infrequent, as genius. ✓

What is the European theatre to its audience? Sweets, bitters, relaxation, excitement, the comforter of its fears and doubts, the outlet of its thousand extraneous energies, the expression of every functional, social, and spiritual disorder of the community. Thus it is a river of impurity; though in the hands of geniuses it may be touched with light, for the genius, an apparition of aspiring humanity, indicates the distant perfection. ✓



CHINA

THE THEATRE IN THE EAST



IN the East the theatre even now preserves much of its ancient tradition. The structure and wisdom here so powerfully evident prove beyond question that the unanimous spiritual activity of a whole race produces forms as irrefutable as perfect engineering: beside which the slight and peculiar edifices of Art, the individual's aspiration, tremble on a most arbitrary foundation.

The Eastern actor is such by caste and heredity, and he enters upon his education in early childhood: it includes all the arts of speech, song and dance, since the drama makes use of these, and the actor must therefore also be dancer and singer.

The language of the dance is as fixed and searching as the spoken language of the race. Just as the writer does not invent words, so the dancer does not invent gestures: he does not compose the dance, or in any way affect its scheme, which has been expounded in the Scriptures. Here nothing is required of the dancer but physical obedience: how-

ever heated a scene, every quiver of the hand, and the subtlest facial expressions are the result of obedience to precise rules. The actor never steps into his part and feels it for himself: such an intrusion of personality would at once mar the spectacular and rhythmic character of the performance. Hence the unassailable poise of the Oriental actor, who is cool and impersonal in the midst of the most passionate action: expressing whatever is required without consuming his own soul by emotion, he is inexhaustible.

The Eastern theatre exists for the great drama, the epic peculiar to each race, which contains within itself the law that it be spoken, sung and danced in public for the spiritual enlightenment of the community. The players regard themselves as messengers for the clear and correct delivery of a divine word. In India, the actor who starts his performance without having prayed is condemned in the scripture as "vulgar," and the audience witnessing such sacrilegious exhibitions falls under a heavy curse.

It is not for the acquisition of special graces and

facility that the dancer studies all his life: it is for a knowledge of the enormous literature of his vocation. From childhood the epic is his sole spiritual and practical education, and in thus fixing directly on the source and goal of his task, he achieves mastery without effort—as a bird learns flight. Thus it is possible for children as young as eight or nine years to demean themselves on the stage with the authority and power of sages, to perform their parts in every way perfectly, so that no one can for an instant consider them “children.” This is not rare in China, and such cases are not regarded as precocious or extraordinary anywhere in the East. It may be said that every actor-dancer in an Eastern community has a control of his medium that would put to shame the technique of the one or two heralded talents that spring up in a century of the European theatre.

In India or China the multiplication table and books of philosophy can be danced. For here the theatre has a vocabulary embracing every conceivable form of thought. In a system so highly evolved, it is impossible for a stranger to read the meaning behind the symbolization. For example,

a Chinese performance is so essentially formal that the movement of the plot cannot be detected by the stranger, nor can he know what emotions are being nor can he know what emotions are being expressed. The slight movement of a finger may be a sign of great passion or indication of a whole train of events important to the story. This is more or less so throughout the East, and it is often only by the superb calm vigor of an actor's manner that one senses how solemn an inspiration lies behind his performance.

That Oriental dancing and pantomime which find such extravagant patronage on the Western stage is the most grotesque misconstruction of the true thing. Whatever is personal, sexual and gaudy has a fitting expression in the sinuous gyration of the "Oriental dancer." Moreover, so little resemblance does it bear to anything Eastern that one wonders how it got its name. Where there is religious background and philosophic structure in the Eastern performance, there is here a blind ambition for effect: the certainty and masterly grace of the Eastern dancer, who forgets herself entirely in



JAVA



JAVA



CAMBODIA



CAMBODIA

the meanings she embodies, are here replaced by vague undulations and a calculated enhancement of the body and its peculiar style of action. In these realms the highest virtue is a detached and special decorative sense, a flair for design in rhythm, color and line, and such a talent is the root and flower of personality. But even this, and genius, are idols that are made out of a strong egoism and can never attain to that pure energy which is the fruit of the profoundest selflessness.

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the inexhaustible springs of light which have for centuries illumined the life of India. These epics reveal every worldly and spiritual experience possible to man, through the sublimest imagery. The modern Indian Nautch relates the adventures and activities of Krishna, and is a dance highly philosophic in essence and esoteric in form.

The Javanese theatre is almost wholly built on Indian tradition and makes use of the Indian epics. But here the theatre is not so severely a sign language, and emotions and actions may be recognized by reason of the greater expressiveness of the ges-

tures employed. In the shadow theatre of Java there exists a form of drama in its finest purity. Here one discovers the keynote to the essential behavior of every Oriental actor—the submissiveness and complete impersonality of a puppet. Indeed, it is his conscious wish to be a puppet in the hands of a divine overlord. While the shadow show achieves the splendor and grip of a living thing, the human dancer is true to his part, and infallible as a well managed puppet. In such a state of mind it needs neither thought nor effort to respond to the demands made upon him, however severe and complicated.

In Cambodia it is quite possible for the stranger to follow a story told in the theatre. The fighting of a battle is performed by a fencing of swords, and the love of hero and heroine is easily read in their gestures, looks and tones.

Bali has a kind of pantomime more akin to pure dancing than elsewhere in the East. Here are seen child dancers highly brilliant and supple in movement. Trained from the age of seven to twelve, these little girls then dance in the theatre till they are



BALI

sixteen, after which they are relegated to the palace of their local prince, and thenceforth never seen again in public. In their short course of study they achieve a skill that is most astounding—and again, it is obvious that such skill cannot be acquired by deliberate practice, but falls naturally into the hands of those who are devoted to a high and fixed spiritual ideal.

It is not for skilful execution that the scientist labors, yet the products of science are by far more finished in every case than the work of the greatest and most painstaking artist. For in devotion to a super-personal and superhuman theme, the grace of Nature herself may be acquired, but in the search for a personal and human grace nothing can accrue but our own limitations.









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